

ADAM AND EVE ON THE ISLAND OF ROTI*

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The Rotinese are a Christian people. In their oral histories, they assert that they sought and obtained the Christian religion before there were Dutch missionaries to preach it. Thus they are confident in their tacit claim to be the oldest and foremost Protestant Christians of the Timor area. This early establishment of Christianity, which can be traced in the archival records of the Dutch East India Company beginning in the eighteenth century, has given the Rotinese the grace of time to assimilate Biblical knowledge to their own culture, creating in the process a distinctive local tradition. Over the past 250 years, this local Christian tradition has developed deep roots on the island.

A feature of this tradition is its aristocratic origins. The formal establishment of Christianity began with the conversion of the ruling families of several small domains in south central Roti,¹ and the new religion was taught via a school system that was originally sponsored and supported by the rulers of these domains. Because the schools taught Malay and, in particular, the Malay Bible, Christianity became intimately and inextricably associated with education and literacy in Malay. While Malay came to be the vehicle of Christianity, the Rotinese language, in its various forms, continued to provide for the oral preservation of older indigenous traditions.

The progress of Christianity was gradual. It spread generally from nobles to commoners in most domains, yet in several there were rulers who personally rejected the new religion and refused conversion, even though members of their own families and fellow clansmen adopted Christianity. This checkered combination of acceptance and rejection persisted throughout the nineteenth century and into the first half of the twentieth. After independence, however, as a result of a mass literacy campaign, an insistence on compulsory primary education for all children, apprehension engendered by the events of the 1965 Communist coup, and the recent introduction of a variety of competing forms of Christianity--Catholic, Pentecostal, and Adventist--the conversion to Christianity is now complete. But the process of accommodating Christianity and traditional wisdom continues in a complexity of oral and written guises. The following is a brief vignette that attempts to describe aspects of this process.

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1. See James J. Fox, *Harvest of the Palm: Ecological Change in Eastern Indonesia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 101-12.

Introduction to the Recitation

On my return to the island of Roti in 1972, the oral poet, Peu Malesi, promised to recite for me a chant that I had never heard before. This chant, he explained, recounted the origin of death and contained knowledge of the past that was rarely revealed. The promise was made in the course of a long evening's discussion of a number of narrative texts, some of which I had gathered during my previous stay on Roti in 1965-66. The clan lord, Mias Kiuk, with whom I was living, had specifically asked that I read to him the texts of various tales relating to his clan, Ingu-Beuk, which I had originally gathered from the former Head of the Earth, S. Adulanu. This man, "Old Meno" or simply "Meno" as he was generally called, had died in the interval between my visits. Already in 1965, however, because of his ritual position, his age, and his personal knowledge, Meno was regarded as the most knowledgeable elder in the domain of Termanu, and after his death his reputation had continued to grow. My reading of Meno's texts was an occasion of special importance, and Peu Malesi--Meno's junior in age and status--had come expressly to hear the texts and to judge them. Most of the evening focused on a discussion of "historical narratives" (*tutui--teteëk*) which, in the cultural traditions of Roti, are an oral genre distinct in form and subject matter from the formulaic ritual chants (*bini*) that preserve a knowledge of primal origins.² (In the narratives, however, occasional lines and phrases from the chants occur.) At one point during the evening I took the opportunity of Malesi's presence to ask the assembled elders about the meaning of a cryptic paired phrase in a narrative I had actually recorded from Malesi. The narrative in question concerned the coming of the first royal ancestors to Termanu and thus, in the Rotinese time perspective, related to a period sixteen generations in the past when the history of the domain began to unfold. The lines, in formal parallelism, were simply:

Ala ta fua beu	"They did not burden the <i>beu</i> -tree
Ma ala ta ndae ka	And they did not drape the <i>ka</i> -tree"

As I expected from past experience, Malesi said little or nothing, since his invariable approach to questions of exegesis is to recite other lines in the poetry itself. On the other hand, Mias Kiuk, himself no poet, but a superb, patient, and knowledgeable commentator of the intricacies of ritual speech, was able to explain these lines as a reference to the former practice of tree burial which preceded the present custom of earthen burial. Prompted by these lines and, I suspect, by the desire to be seen as Meno's successor, Malesi offered to recite the chant of the origin of death. In three days, he said dramatically, he would return and recite this chant. Mias accepted his offer on my behalf and agreed to make the arrangements for the gathering. Word of the occasion spread in the Ufa Len area, and on the agreed-upon night quite a number of people assembled to hear Malesi who, having been given a good meal and sufficient palm gin to induce a "flow of words," recited the following chant:

Teke Telu ma Koa Hulu: Text and Translation

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| 1. Hida dodo bei leo fan | Once long ago |
| 2. Sapu nitu bei ta | There was no spirit death |

2. See James J. Fox, "Standing in Time and Place: The Structure of Rotinese Historical Narratives," in *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia*, ed. Anthony Reid and David Marr (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books, 1979), pp. 10-25; and "Retelling the Past: The Communicative Structure of a Rotinese Historical Narrative," in *Canberra Anthropology*, 3 (1980), pp. 56-66.

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| 3. Datu bei leo don | Once in a by-gone time |
| 4. Lalo mula bei ta. | There was no ghostly demise. |
| 5. Poin bei fua beuk | Heaven still burdened the beu tree |
| 6. Lain bei ndae kak. | The Heights still draped the ka tree. |
| 7. Ma Lesik Lain Lelebe | The Shining Lord of Heaven |
| 8. Ma Manek Ata Malua | The Bright Lord on High |
| 9. Nafada Koa Hulu | Told Koa Hulu |
| 10. Ma nafada Teke Telu | And told Teke Telu |
| 11. Nafada ita bain | Told our male ancestor |
| 12. Ma nafada ita bein | And told our female ancestor |
| 13. Nanea lutu kiu | To guard the surrounding stone wall |
| 14. Ma lutu kiu fani oe | The wall surrounding the honey tree |
| 15. Ma nanea paä feo | And to guard the encircling fence |
| 16. De paa feo tua nasu. | The fence encircling the syrup tree. |
| 17. Siluk ka soi dulu | Sunrise opened the east |
| 18. Do huak mai langa | Dawn arrived at the head. |
| 19. Inak Koa Hulu | The woman Koa Hulu |
| 20. Neu fetu lae Menge Batu | Went and stepped on Rock Snake |
| 21. Ma hange lae Tuna Buta. | And trod on Eel Serpent. |
| 22. Tuna Buta natane | Eel Serpent asked |
| 23. Ma Menge Batu natane : | And Rock Snake asked : |
| 24. "Singo-na nai be | "Where is the error |
| 25. Ma salan nai bei | Where is the wrong |
| 26. De ta ketu do tua nasu | To pluck a leaf of the syrup tree |
| 27. Ma seu boa fani oen." | And to pick a fruit of the honey tree?" |
| 28. Boe ma inak leo Koa Hulu | So the woman Koa Hulu |
| 29. Lole halana | Raised her voice |
| 30. Ma selu dasin na neu : | And elevated her speech, saying : |
| 31. "Lesik leo poin | "The Power above |
| 32. Ma Manek leo lain | And the Lord in Heaven |
| 33. Ma ana henge ne | He bound us |
| 34. Ma ana bala taa, nae | And tied us, saying : |
| 35. 'Boso ketu do fani oen | 'Do not pluck the leaf of the honey tree |
| 36. Ma seu boa tua nasu. | And do not pick the fruit of the syrup tree. |
| 37. Tee o seu boa tua nasu | If you pick the fruit of the syrup tree |
| 38. Do o ketu do fani oen | Or if you pluck the leaf of the honey tree |
| 39. Makaheduk nai ndia | There is sourness there |

40. De sapu nitu nai ndia
 41. Makes nai ndia.
 42. De lalo mula nai ndia."
 43. Boe ma Menge Batu kokolak
 44. Ma Tuna Buta dedeak, nae:
 45. "Seu boak tua nasu na
 46. Mandak nai ndia
 47. Ma ketu do fani oe na
 48. Malole nai ndia."
 49. Boe ma inak leo Koa Hulu
 50. Seu boak tua nasu
 51. Ketu do fani oe
 52. De neni fe Teke Telu.
 53. De leu laa boa tua nasu
 54. Ma do fani oe.
 55. Boe ma Lesik Lain Lelebe
 56. Manek Ata Malua
 57. Tolamu sasali
 58. Ma nalai lelana.
 59. Lesik Lain Lelebe
 60. Ma Manek Ata Malua
 61. Ma naggo Koa Hulu
 62. Ma nalo Teke Telu.
 63. Teke Telu nahala
 64. Ma Koa Hulu nahala ma nae:
 65. "Ami die dongo nai ia
 66. Ma nene fino nai ia.
 67. Ami malelak ndolu ingu
 68. Ma malelak lela leo."
 69. Boe ma inak Koa Hulu
 70. Nahala nasosi nae:
 71. "Au fetu lae Menge Batu
 72. Ma hange lae Tuna Buta,
 73. Tuna manatunga salak
 74. Ma Menge manasanga singok.
 75. De au seu boa tuna nasu
- A spirit death lies there
 There is bitterness there
 A ghostly demise lies there."
 So Rock Snake spoke
 And the Eel Serpent conversed, saying:
 "Pick the fruit of the syrup tree
 For that is proper
 And pluck the leaf of the honey tree
 For that is good."
 So the woman like Koa Hulu
 Picked the fruit of the syrup tree
 Plucked the leaf of the honey tree
 She took and gave it to Teke Telu.
 And they went and ate the fruit of the
 syrup tree
 And the leaf of the honey tree.
 The Powerful Lord of Heaven
 And the Great Lord on High
 Came rushing
 And came hurrying.
 The Bright Lord of Heaven
 And the Shining Lord on High
 Called Koa Hulu
 And shouted to Teke Telu.
 Teke Telu spoke
 And Koa Hulu spoke, saying:
 "We wait right here
 And we stand right here.
 We know the rules of the land
 We know the wisdom of the clan."
 So the woman Koa Hulu
 Spoke and replied, saying:
 "I stepped on Rock Snake
 And I trod on Eel Serpent,
 The eel who misleads
 The snake who misdirects.
 Then I picked the fruit of the syrup tree

76. Ma au ketu do fani oe." And I plucked the leaf of the honey tree."
77. Boe ma nae: So he said:
78. "Kalau leo ndiak sona "If this is so that
79. O seu boak tua nasu You picked the fruit of the syrup tree
80. Ma o ketu do fani oe And you plucked the leaf of the honey tree
81. Na au henge ne neu o Then I bind you
82. Ma bala ta neu emi And I tie you
83. Loe mo late-dae To descend in the earth's grave
84. Ma dilu mo kopa-tua." And to go down in a *lontar* coffin."
85. Fai esa manuni On that day
86. Ma ledok dua mateben And at that time
87. Boe ma touk leo Teke Telu The man like Teke Telu
88. Ma inak leo Koa Hulu And the woman like Koa Hulu
89. Ana sapu tolumumu He died instantly
90. Ma lalo solo bebe. And she perished suddenly.
91. Boe ma besak ka fifilo langa So they felled the coffin head.
92. Ma tati nonoli dulu. And they cut the casket top
93. De ala tao neu kopa tua And they made them into a *lontar* coffin
94. Ma ala tao neu bolo dae. And they made them into an earthen hole,
95. Pisa (hu) hulu dae la The baskets for digging the earth
96. Boe ma ala dadi. They originated then.
97. Boe ma taka huhuma tua And the axes for cutting the *lontar*
98. Boe ala tola. They appeared then.
99. Boe soe huhulu dae la Coconut shells for scooping the earth
100. Boe ala dadi. They originated then.
101. Boe ma besi kakali dae la And the iron sticks for digging the earth
102. Boe ala dadi. They originated then.
103. Hu touk-ka Teke Telu, So the man Teke Telu,
104. Ana sapu He died
105. Ma inak ka Koa Hulu, And woman Koa Hulu,
106. Ana lalo. She perished.
107. Besak ka pisak huhulu dae la Thus the baskets for scooping the earth
108. Ala dadi They originated
109. Ma taka huhuma tua la And the axes for cutting the *lontar*
110. Ala tola. They appeared.
111. Nduku faik kia boe To this very day
112. Ma losa ledok kia boe. And to this very time.

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| 113. | Hu ala molo tunga momolok | So it is that all men walk in their footsteps |
| 114. | Ma ala tabu tunga tatabuk | And all men tread their path |
| 115. | Leo faik ia dalen | As on this day |
| 116. | Ma nduku ledok ia tein. | And at this time. |

Reaction to the Recitation

When Malesi had finished his recitation, the reaction of those present was unanimous. Without exception, the presentation was accepted approvingly as precisely what it had been declared to be: the revelation of a crucial portion of indigenous esoteric wisdom. Everyone seemed to appreciate the chant both for its beauty and its unusualness. The fact that no one could remember having heard it before seemed only to confirm the rarity of the revelation. Since I had taperecorded it, I was asked to replay my tape that night and on numerous subsequent occasions.

The recitation began to gain some local notoriety and eventually the poet Seu Bai, Malesi's fellow-clansman and rival, came from Namo Dale to Mias' house especially to hear the recording. His reaction to the text was quite different from that of others who heard the chant, for he immediately rejected it as false. His grounds, however, were thoroughly traditional--the almost predictable reaction of an accomplished chanter. "Teke Telu" and "Koa Hulu" were not proper chant-names and the text therefore belonged to none of Roti's established ritual canons. Only one person--a schoolteacher--from among all those to whom I played the tape recognized the chant as a reworking, in oral tradition, of the Genesis story of Adam and Eve.

The Text and Its Relation to the Rotinese Canon

Since 1965, I have been systematically studying the way in which oral poetry is produced on the island of Roti. This has meant recording as large a corpus of texts as possible but, even more importantly, gathering numerous versions of the "same" chant from different poets as well as, on subsequent return visits, the "same" chant as told by the same poet. From this research, it is clear that the chief feature of all Rotinese poetry is a thorough-going parallelism dependent upon a rigorous pairing of semantic elements. Knowledge of these permissible semantic pairs or dyadic sets is the requisite of proper poetic composition.³ (On the basis of the translation of perhaps a third of my existing corpus of texts, I have been able to compile a dictionary of slightly over 1,000 dyadic sets which comprise a significant portion of a poet's basic linguistic repertoire.) In addition to this repertoire, an accomplished poet must know the canons of his tradition. Specific chants within this canon are linked to and identified with a body of chant-names, each of which is itself a compound pair. The exploits or exemplary life features of these named characters and their interrelations are the subjects of the chants.

3. See James J. Fox, "Semantic Parallelism in Rotinese Ritual Language," in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 127 (1971), pp. 215-55; "Our Ancestors Spoke in Pairs: Rotinese Views of Language, Dialect and Code," in *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, ed. R. Bauman and J. Sherzer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 65-85; and "On Binary Categories and Primary Symbols: Some Rotinese Perspectives," in *The Interpretation of Symbolism*, ed. R. Willis (London: Malaby Press, 1975), pp. 99-132.

Broadly speaking, these chants belong to two classes: one tells of the complex, complementary deeds of beings of the heavens and of the sea whose interactions gave rise to the cultural objects and institutions of the Rotinese.⁴ These chants may have once formed part of a single epic, now told only in fragments as the ritual prelude (or conclusion) to the use of the specific "objects" in question (as, for example, the tools for building a home, the implements for weaving, the containers used for dyeing, or the objects for bridewealth exchange). The other class of chants comprises a large and diverse collection of mortuary compositions which are elaborated to cover all possible categories of deceased persons (nobles or commoners, rich or poor, widows or orphans, young or old). Following the format common to these chants, the deceased is compared to a specific chant-character and then the stereotyped genealogy and life course of this character is told, often allowing the character to explain the reasons for his or her death and to admonish the living on what they must do. The recitation of these chants is confined to funerals.

Although these two broad canonical classes do not exhaust the possibilities of ritual languages, which the Rotinese insist can be used for any purpose, they do identify the major components of the tradition. It is from this vantage point that one can judge Malesi's presentation of *Teke Telu ma Koa Hulu* and the reaction to it.

From the point of view of Rotinese tradition, several features of Malesi's composition make it unusual, if not unique. The first is that it assumes neither the format of an origin chant nor that of a mortuary chant but instead attempts to merge these two formats. As an origin chant, it purports to explain the inception of earthen burial as opposed to tree burial, a change hinted at in other contexts; more specifically, it explains the origin of a group of objects associated with the preparation of the coffin and the grave: "baskets for digging the earth and axes for cutting the lontar," "coconut shells for scooping the earth and iron sticks for digging the earth." The format and phraseology of this section of the chant are precisely those of an origin chant and are made the more plausible by the existence of other origin chants that explain the origin of similar objects, such as axes and adzes. But the key feature of the chant is its explanation of the origin of death: "Thus all men walk in their footsteps and all men tread their path." This is achieved by providing an explanation of the cause of the death of the first ancestors, following the common format of a mortuary chant: "So the man Teke Telu, he died and the woman Koa Hulu, she perished . . . as on this day and at this time." The cogency of this explanation hinges on specific cultural associations. The poetic reference to "honey tree" and "syrup tree" is to the lontar or *Borassus* palm that provides the basis of the Rotinese economy. The tree (*tua*) is identified by the honey-sweet syrup that is produced from juice that is regularly extracted from its crown. The fact that most Rotinese are buried in coffins made from this same tree provides the critical link in the underlying cultural argument: the tree in the garden--the tree of life--becomes the tree of death. Tree burial gives way to earthen burial as the beu-tree and ka-tree are replaced by felling the honey tree and syrup tree. Only in dealing with the subject of death and by relying on specific cultural associations is it possible to combine the formats of origin and mortuary chant so felicitously.

Similarly--except for one structural flaw--the chant is rendered in technically perfect, indeed exquisite parallelism, for Malesi is a master of poetic composition. The flaw, however, is the one that Seu Bai recognized in rejecting the chant and is directly related to its nontraditional derivation. Seu Bai objected not to the names, Teke Telu and Koa Hulu, but to the possibility of such names. By the very rules of composition, the double names of chant characters must be either masculine

4. Fox, "On Binary Categories," pp. 102-10.

or feminine; they cannot be hermaphroditic names of the sort that Malesi has created. Given the need to transform an Adam and Eve pair into a Rotinese equivalent, Malesi has had to decompose his chant character into separate parts. Thus, for example, since only the woman Koa Hulu steps on the snake, line 19 has no parallel line to accompany it. Similarly, lines 28, 49, 52, 53, 69 lack parallel lines and are thus improperly composed. At one point, in fact, Koa Hulu gives "fruit and leaf" to Teke Telu, which is perfectly intelligible but formally unacceptable by the rules of the naming system in ritual speech.

Nonetheless, for the majority of Rotinese who heard Malesi's chant, these formal flaws do not seem to have detracted from the power and beauty of the composition, nor were the chant's partial parallels with Biblical events worthy of note or objection. This chant is, however, exceptional for the fact that it draws on Roti's other tradition--a 250-year-old literary tradition based on the Malay Bible.

Two Traditions of Transmission

In 1679, a few of Roti's local rulers began to study Malay at the behest of the Dutch East India Company. By 1729, the first of these rulers had converted to Christianity and, within a few years, had succeeded in establishing a Malay school in his domain. Three other local rulers followed this precedent, and by 1754 there were six Malay schools on the island. By 1765, these schools--staffed with Rotinese teachers--had become nearly self-sustaining and remained so through the first half of the nineteenth century, with occasional assistance from the Netherlands Missionary Society. After 1857, Rotinese schools were given direct colonial government support, and their numbers increased rapidly. By 1871, there were no less than thirty-four local schools on the island. Their purpose was to teach Malay, and their major text and resource was the Malay Bible. And as Malay was the basis for Indonesian, the Rotinese made an effortless transition to the use of the national language in their schools.⁵

The Rotinese have thus had a long exposure to a written tradition and are, in fact, among the paramount exponents of its use in the Timor area. Yet what is remarkable--and requires explanation--is the relative disjunction of Rotinese oral and written traditions, each with its distinct source of inspiration. This disjunction is itself reflected in a social etiquette that insists on separate linguistic genres and, until recently, showed a marked aversion to language mixing. The lack of a single standard form of spoken Rotinese and the reliance on a variety of dialects to convey local traditions have also contributed to a situation in which Malay alone is deemed appropriate for written communication and either dialect or ritual language for oral traditions. (Thus when I arrived on Roti in 1965, there was as yet no significant effort to record oral traditions in a written form of Rotinese.) Furthermore, as long-standing Christians, most Rotinese do not see their traditions to be at variance with those of Christianity and indeed often see in their origin myths and chants evidence of a kind of ancestral perception of Biblical occurrences. Finally, from a social point of view, it is evident that full functional literacy was, in the past, confined largely to the upper strata of Rotinese society and only began to affect the whole of society after independence.

Yet despite the possession of a written tradition it is the oral tradition that remains dominant on Roti. The Rotinese place great stress on speaking well and value verbal abilities above all others. Hence, in any social interaction, the written word

5. For a fuller discussion of this linguistic situation and its history, see Fox, "Our Ancestors Spoke in Pairs," and *Harvest of the Palm*, pp. 61-195.

is almost always transmuted into strikingly different verbal forms. This process is most evident, for example, in church services which are supposedly based on the written word.

In the past (as missionary letters reveal), Roti's popular preachers were themselves oral poets and they, it seems, were principally responsible for the development and elaboration of a "new" theological vocabulary and a set of conventions in ritual language for rendering the scriptures in an appropriate oral mode. The canonical parallelism in much of the Old Testament--itself of comparative significance⁶--seems to have encouraged this process of translation among the Rotinese.

Thus the borrowing of established dyadic sets and the common use of a botanic idiom carry sermons in ritual language well beyond the original written text. Christ, for example, is compared to "a banana with copper blossom and a sugarcane with golden sheath" and his death and resurrection are metaphorically likened to the growth cycle of "yam and taro." In this way, a text becomes the "pretext" for a new form of speaking.⁷

Comments and Conclusion

This article has taken as its starting point the recitation of an unusual chant in the ritual language of the Rotinese and has attempted to indicate how a crucial Christian religious text has been transformed in the Rotinese oral tradition. I would argue that this forms part of a general process by which Christianity has been assimilated by the traditional culture. In this process, an oral mode of transmission has managed to predominate, despite the existence of an established tradition of writing. Ultimately this predominance of the spoken word rests on the authority and ability of persons and the value accorded speaking.

One final point deserves noting. This study would not have been possible, in its present form, were it not for the existence of yet another form of transmission--namely that of the tape recording. In 1965, I brought the first tape recorder to the villages of Roti, and its effect was dramatically evident among the poets of the island. My "voice catcher" (*penangkap suara*), as it was immediately named, provided the means of recording spontaneously and permanently the spoken word of particular individuals. From the Rotinese point of view, this exceeded by far anything that could be achieved by writing. It represented the triumph of oral transmission.

In the past sixteen years, since my first visit to Indonesia, tape recording has become an ubiquitous feature of everyday life. What this suggests is that now oral cultures of this and other parts of the world have a technological means for their own preservation which oral cultures in past ages did not. On Roti, a new phase of oral presentation has begun and with it have come new modes of religious accommodation.

6. James J. Fox, "Roman Jakobson and the Comparative Study of Parallelism," in *Roman Jakobson: Echoes of his Scholarship*, ed. C. H. van Schooneveld and D. Armstrong (Lisse: Peter de Ridder, 1977), pp. 59-90.

7. James J. Fox, "The Rotinese Chotbah as a Linguistic Performance," in *Accent on Variety*, ed. A. Halim, L. Carrington, and S. A. Wurm [Vol. 3 of *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Austronesian Linguistics, Jakarta*] (Canberra: Pacific Linguistics, 1983), pp. 311-18.